Lynch / Rivette. Touch Me Not: “Blue Velvet” and “The Duchess of Langeais”

Comparing a film by David Lynch with one by Jacques Rivette, paired by a new retrospective series in New York.

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This article accompanies the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s dual retrospective of the films of Jacques Rivette and David Lynch and is part of an ongoing review of Rivette’s films for the Notebook*, in light of several major re-releases of his work.*



At first, David Lynch’s most rigid film, the mellifluous *Blue Velvet* (1986), being paired with Jacques Rivette’s buoyant, fluid 2007 adaptation of Balzac’s *La Duchess de Langeais*, might seem like a rather unusual way to begin a film series intending to strike up parallels between the two (at least heretofore) unconnected film directors. The swings from love to hate and back again between the lovers in *The Duchess of Langeais* are matched and counterpointed by the swings of Rivette’s late camera, both balanced and frantic in its restless pursuit of clarification which, of course, it never seems to find. In contrast, Lynch presents *Blue Velvet*’s world like a series of shop-front window displays. The balance and triteness of the movie’s saccharine surface is undisturbed by its characters discovering an inexorable sexual violence in its make-up, in their homes, gardens, diners, hotel complexes. And likewise, the same characters, so fixed in place by their pat ideals of sex, love, and living, miss the significance of their own story altogether. Their lives, unlike Langeais and Montriveau’s in Rivette’s film, are not consumed by the spiraling passion

they haplessly stumble upon. That the netherworld Jeffrey (Kyle McLaughlin) encounters in *Blue Velvet*—the hidden cabals of deviants, murderers, corrupt cops, and Roy Orbison-impersonators that litter the course of his ever-deepening descent—ultimately affirms his trite bleach-commercial fantasies is a more unsettling thought still.

The only time that Lynch and Rivette's paths have hitherto crossed was as participants in the 1995 centenary omnibus project, *Lumière and Company*, where both were invited to work with the original Lumière camera and conceive of a single-take, 52-second short. In his, Lynch—in a bravura, multi-layered sideways motion, closing and opening the lens to hide his shifts in-between sets—glides through a Lois Weber-like bit of pastoral intrigue and into a bizarre, underground, webbed fantasia: a naked woman strung up and writhing in a giant test-tube while jilting monsters with cheese-wheel heads ominously, conspiratorially stagger toward her. Like *Blue Velvet*'s equally bravura, equally on-the-nose opening, the candy-wrapper artifice is peeled away, exposing the mysterious, throbbing organs underneath. (Bruce Springsteen's definition of it: "Everything was there, but underneath, everything was rumbling.") It's both utterly sincere and utterly ironic (and obvious), and owing to the same contradiction that constitutes *Blue Velvet*'s clash of superficial styles. Rivette's contribution, like its somewhat longer predecessors *Out 1* (1971/4) and *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974)[1], is a light spoof of the Lumière-Bazin ethos of untouched documentation; as his scene plays out, the grid-like wide-shot begins to swim with activity, as each quadrant populates and unpopulates: a girl arcing, caroming across the frame as she rollerblades in and out of shot, a discombobulated Lumière-style gentlemen wobbling with his newspaper, a child who furtively follows the movements of the rollerblader. Like *The Duchess of Langeais*, the build-up of criss-crossing movements —endless pageants and balls in the former, the rollerblader tracing circles around the others in the *Lumière* short—appear to be never-ending, each gesture paving the way for two or three more. Rivette's camera, for all its revelation of photographic reality, is rendered utterly useless in penetrating its subjects or consolidating a perspective. The characters of *The Duchess of Langeais* are caught in a kind of lateral sweep, a waltz with the camera, at first leading, then being led in turn. The action is so self-perpetuating—the soaring emotion and cruel sadism of Langeais and Montriveau's love games, for which we have no interior reference, as well as the whirling of dancers as they glide around the room—that it outpaces even the darting tracks and pans of the camera at every moment.



In *Blue Velvet*, quite the opposite is true: the infamous Hopper-Rossellini “Mommy!” sequence is doubly electric because of the cold stare of Lynch’s mastershot, as is the later scene at Ben’s apartment (a similarly bizarre angle on Ben’s ethereal, tacky version of Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams”). Like an approximation of the Ludovico Technique, this image is never entirely subjective and never entirely objective—it’s difficult to imagine the moment as *seeing through* Jeffrey’s eyes and ears, as the perspective seems so entirely devoid of psychology. The images Rivette conjures for even the most sedentary of sequences in *The Duchess of Langeais* are altogether less fixed, as even conversations between the protagonists are covered in wide shots that either horseshoe from one side to another, suggesting flatness, or forcefully track in and out for emphasis, suggesting depth, but approach a similar border of subjective/objective. In Rivette's ball sequences, where our perspective could well be three or four perspectives at once, or none, the mystery of things, mysteriously, is not dissipated.

1. In the full version of *Lumière and Company*, Rivette, immediately after taking the shot, is reminded by an assistant that it is now his shortest film. “Precisely, it’s too short! I can’t ever make a long enough film!”